

'Finland: Europe opens up to the north-east' from Le Figaro (18 October 1994)

Caption: On 18 October 1994, commenting on the positive result of the referendum held on 16 October in Finland for the ratification of the Treaty of Accession to the European Union, the French daily newspaper Le Figaro emphasises the importance of this accession for Northern Europe.

Source: Le Figaro. 18.10.1994, n° 15 602. Paris. "Finlande: l'Europe s'ouvre au nord-est", auteur:Bocev, Pierre , p. 4.

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The first element of a Nordic group in the EU

Finland: Europe opens up to the north-east

On 1 January, the European family will have a common border with Russia and its centre of gravity will shift.

The victory in Finland of those voting ‘yes’ to the European Union should provide a fillip to supporters of membership in the other two Nordic candidate countries, Sweden and Norway. Of the approximately four million voters in Finland, 57 % approved their country’s joining the European family, with 43 % against.

In Copenhagen, the Danish Prime Minister, Poul Nyroup Rasmussen, said that the Finnish ‘yes’ vote was ‘vital for the North and for Europe. It will lead, we hope, to an equally positive outcome in the referendums in Sweden and Norway on 13 and 28 November.’ Barring any major upset in Parliament, which still has to confirm Sunday’s ballot, Finland will join the Twelve on 1 January 1995, together with Austria. This will mean that, for the first time, the European Union will have a common border with Russia (AFP).

With every enlargement of the European team, each faction makes a tally of its supporters. The question is always the same: will a new State’s membership of the European Union result in greater influence for the ‘free-traders’, ultra-liberals expected to rally around the British lion? Or, on the contrary, will it tip the balance in favour of the often protectionist ‘Community-ites’ whose mascot is said to be the Gallic rooster?

‘It is widely believed that we will align ourselves with Great Britain,’ says Jan-Magnus Jansson, an academic who campaigned in vain for a ‘no’ vote, ‘but nothing is less certain.’

That, he says, is the position of the Conservative Party, but the Social Democrats, who are expected to win the parliamentary elections next March, are ‘generally in favour of a closer Union, so as to impose their social ideas.’ Of course, those ideas are quite the opposite of the positions London is defending.

The result, according to his analysis, is that Helsinki will quite often be on the same side as Germany.

In an attempt to clarify the question, a high-ranking Finnish diplomat explained that it will be London when it comes to trade, but Paris when it comes to Europe’s future evolution. Bonn will take pride of place when Europe’s eastward expansion is on the agenda. A Nordic group will form spontaneously in support of opening up to the Baltic States, while the ‘small countries’, whatever other differences they might have, will close ranks to avoid being trampled on by the big ones.

The national interest

Others are quick to question the very idea that Finland belongs with the fervent supporters of free trade. ‘Trade with the USSR on a clearing basis suited them perfectly well,’ points out one ambassador from an EU country, ‘and they are definitely not aligned with Anglo-Saxons.’

This European diplomat believes that the national interest will prevail. ‘Free-traders when they feel strong, but protectionist when in a position of weakness.’ As a general rule, he predicts, the Finns ‘will be good Europeans because they are good students.’ He even believes that ‘they won’t hesitate to criticise those they deem to be misbehaving.’

‘We will often be on Great Britain’s side,’ adds Max Jakobson, a political scientist, ‘but not necessarily, and certainly not automatically.’

In official circles, views are more nuanced. ‘We want Brussels to operate effectively, but not at the expense of the small Member States,’ says the Foreign Minister, Heikki Haavisto, without further elaboration. For a

country that is so dependent on exports, he says, it is natural to support free trade, but that does not prevent Helsinki from ‘understanding France’, for example on agricultural issues.

The Prime Minister, Esko Aho, who is a centrist like his Foreign Minister, rejects from the outset ‘any systematic alliance with one country or group of countries.’ Nordic solidarity will come into play, provided Sweden and Norway also join. With respect to institutional reform, the small countries will have common interests to defend.

In any event, notes the Head of Government, ‘the future Union should be based on the existence of independent states.’ This should reassure Paris (and London), but it is a rejection — at least at this stage — of the federalist ideas advocated in early September in a CDU/CSU working paper.

Trade and discipline

The Finnish reaction will almost certainly be measured and pragmatic. Paavo Lipponen, the Social Democrat whom everyone sees as the future Prime Minister, argues for a middle way. ‘We will be on the side of neither the fanatical federalists nor the boisterous anti-federalists. Each additional step forward has to be endorsed by the Member States and their people.’

Should Sweden and Norway choose not to follow its example, Denmark would be its only Scandinavian ally and Finland, acting alone, would aim to preserve its interests in the concert of Europeans.

But if a Nordic bloc emerges it will carry some weight — in trade, the environment, budgetary discipline, acting as an advocate for the Baltic States and, as tradition demands, transparency in the Brussels debates. Should this happen, and the referendums of 13 and 28 November will tell, Europe’s centre will indeed shift northward.

P.B.